

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE EDUCATIONAL POLICIES AND PROGRAM OF THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION

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In 1980 Ronald Reagan was elected President by an electoral vote of 489 to 49 over incumbent Jimmy Carter. Among both Reagan supporters and others, his margin of victory was interpreted as a mandate for his platform of cutting taxes, reducing inflation, balancing the budget, getting government "off our backs," and restoring our national defense posture. In reality, however, Reagan's vote plurality victory was only marginal.

It has always been my impression that the media can make presidential contenders out of extremely marginal candidates -- as were Ronald Reagan in 1979 and George Wallace in 1971, and as Jesse Jackson was in the 1984 primaries. Such persons, despite their lack of experience, are great communicators who are able to oversimplify and dramatize emotional but relatively meaningless issues that other candidates, in trying not to offend significant segments of the voting population, choose not to overemphasize. Reagan, of course, made it all the way, despite being generally recognized as the least well-informed candidate in a long while. His strengths were a well-articulated conservative philosophy and a cabinet of followers sharing, as was to be expected, similar views. No one doubted what James Watt thought about most issues.

In the eyes of many in the education community, Reagan ran largely on "nonissues," such as restoring prayer in the schools, eliminating the newly established Department of Education, and providing tuition tax credits and vouchers. He managed to make deep cuts in social spending in his first year in office by using Republican congressional support and by converting several Democrats to go along with his "mandate." Nevertheless, education cuts were far less substantial than those Reagan sought, due, strangely enough, to the efforts of a few key congressional leaders such as Senators Weicker and Stafford and Congressman John Ashbrook.

Terrel Bell's appointment as the second Secretary of Education was early on described as necessary only to oversee the phasing out of the department. Still, the education community greeted Bell as a welcome relief after the inexperienced Hufstedler tour. Although one suspects it may have been necessary for Secretary Bell to compromise some earlier beliefs and values, he nonetheless set out to run the department and provide leadership as best he could under circumstances which included many political appointees with far more conservative views on education than either Bell's or the President's. In a little-noted move, Bell appointed a commission to study and make recommendations on American education that ultimately were to have a substantial impact on schools.

Where the Reagan Philosophy is Felt

Categorical funds. Through the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, the so-called block grant of Chapter 2 vastly complicated categorical funding procedures. School people were ready for a plan to get them out of competition for many small grants. While categorical aid advocates argued that this produced unhealthy competition for their particular interests, others felt deregulation was greatly needed.

DOE personnel cuts. The FY85 budget proposal presented in February, 1984, offered an overall reduction of Department of Education employees by 33 percent, from 7,409 employees in 1981 to 4,979 in 1985. This, of course, depends on congressional authorization.

Bilingual education. Very early in the Reagan Administration, Secretary Bell withdrew controversial regulations that had sought to impose a relatively narrow approach to instruction of students of limited-English-speaking ability. From the original 1968 legislation authorizing the Bilingual Education Act to the historic Lau vs. Nichols Supreme Court decision in 1974, the complexities of this issue were understood by only a few, but argued loudly by many. Interestingly, careful analysts of the issue tend to refute most of the uninformed criticism of bilingual education.¹

School integration. The arrival of new appointees to the Justice Department and Office of Civil Rights has made it easier to extract settlements in litigation calling for desegregation by proposing voluntary plans or magnet schools such as those in Bakersfield, California, and St. Louis, Missouri. Experience shows that such plans rarely provide substantial remedies to civil rights violations, particularly in urban areas. Because such settlements come in marked contrast to the boundary changes or school pairing plans compelled in Swan vs. Charlotte-Mecklenburg, it remains to be seen whether voluntary plans will prevail in the appeal process.

Equity. Perhaps the most significant change has been to reduce the emphasis on "educational equity," an area in which the federal government has played a significant role during the past two decades and increase the emphasis on "educational excellence." Particularly since publication of A Nation at Risk, legislation has been intense at the state level in increasing graduation requirements, using competency or proficiency tests for students and teachers, reinstating homework and attendance requirements, and stiffening college entrance requirements. Although many of these state legislative activities were well under way before last year, the Reagan Administration is eager to take credit for them and to deny the Democrats the education issue they once thought they had.

Where the Rhetoric is Rampant

Slogans -- far more than any well-conceived policy aimed at deeply rooted problems -- have characterized the President's posture toward American education. In April, 1983, for instance, Secretary Bell released the Commission on Excellence report to the press at the White House. After the Secretary had presented the report and praised the Commission for its recommendations on standards and achievement, President Reagan appeared. He briefly recognized the Commission, and then announced that he was going to continue to work toward better education by getting prayer back in the schools and eliminating the Department of Education. He has continually stressed "private sector initiatives," apparently feeling this will help save cities whose once-strong tax base has been lost and who now find themselves with many more tough-to-teach students than in past decades.

Although legislation advocating prayer in the schools was recently defeated in the Senate, this issue will continue to be debated at both the national and state levels. Tennessee, New Mexico, New Jersey, and several other states have passed "moment of silence" legislation that permits students a brief period, usually at the start of the day, for prayer, meditation, or contemplation. The U.S. Supreme Court has reaffirmed the unconstitutionality of government-written prayer and in April agreed to consider "moment of silence" legislation in the year ahead.

Tuition tax credits have been proposed in several bills. The Senate expressed its attitude toward them in November, 1983, when it voted 59 to 38 to table one such proposal that would have allowed federal income tax credit on tuition starting at \$100 and going up to \$300, at an estimated annual cost of \$337 million in 1985 and \$853 million by 1987. Actual tax credit costs are about as difficult to predict as defense hardware costs.

Ironically, there is no legislation before Congress that would eliminate the Department of Education. Although the Heritage Foundation flunks Reagan for this failure, there was little support for Secretary Bell's idea to create some sort of foundation to manage education and even less support for "farming out" education to various other departments in the government. Although the rhetoric continues, abandonment of the department is going nowhere.

A final area in which there is much talk but little substance is "discipline." Ranked as the number one problem in education each year in the Gallup Poll, discipline is a serious problem in perhaps only 8 to 10 percent of American schools and is surely not a top priority among most educators. Turning discipline into a campaign issue in an election year — which Reagan and some zealots have done — is pure politics.

"Level" Funding

That education had become a political issue was very apparent in the FY85 budget recommendation of \$15,484,949,000 for education — a slight increase over the \$15.4 billion

FY84 appropriation. Although bureaucrats call this "level funding," all previous appropriations during the Reagan years were well above the President's requests, which sought to reduce the education budget by approximately 25 percent. In this election year, the asking is at a level very close to the authorized level of spending last year. Thus, even though the President claimed early in 1984 that federal spending had caused the decline in achievement in schools, his Administration had not succeeded in reducing that spending. Furthermore, Secretary Bell, along with congressional leadership, had made a persuasive case with OMB in resisting proposed reductions.

The federal education budget during the Reagan years includes other salient features. For instance, the federal budget contributes only about 9 percent of the total expenditures for education in the United States. More specifically, it is 6.8 percent of the elementary and secondary education expenditure, but goes as high as 13.7 percent for higher education where overall expenditures are obviously less. Since expenditures during the Reagan years have remained relatively constant, this percentage of total education expenditure has not changed significantly. Differences in expenditures between funds spent within the total budget have evened out from 1982, when \$7.1 billion was spent for higher education, compared to \$6.1 billion for elementary-secondary (\$1.6 billion was spent in other categories). In the FY85 proposals, the numbers showed \$7.0 billion for elementary-secondary and \$6.8 billion for higher education.

The largest single increase proposed in the FY 85 budget was \$250 million for Chapter 2 funds of ECIA (block grants), which are to be used flexibly at the state and local levels for implementing reforms recommended by the Commission on Excellence. While this consolidation reduces bureaucratic regulations and extensive competition for limited grant monies, some elements of the education lobby have serious reservations about the plan. Although the budget request for the National Institute of Education is up \$6 million to \$54 million, the agency remains feebly underfunded. NIE has had its trials, with conservative ideology tending at times to undermine its work, despite able leadership by Manuel Justiz.

The President first announced a request for \$50 million to improve the teaching of science and mathematics, but no appropriation was made during that year, in which several other bills were introduced ranging up to \$425 million. This hopelessly inadequate amount reflects the President's deep belief that the federal government should not undertake a significant effort even when a major crisis or substantially agreed upon deficiency exists in education.

A number of significant changes in the student aid program in higher education were proposed to provide more incentive for student self-help and requiring families to contribute a higher percentage of adjusted income. Other initiatives discussed in the budget proposal, although carrying no significant funding, addressed the problem of adult illiteracy, which the private sector has been encouraged to help overcome. Last spring, President Reagan initiated an "academic fitness" program paralleling the long-standing physical fitness program.

Conclusion

For the last two decades, the federal government has made a highly visible and significant effort to better meet the educational needs of students. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 provided substantial funds for children of economically deprived families and later added provisions for children of limited English-speaking ability or special education needs. Results began to appear after several years in the form of basic skills achievement; scores began to rise in test and retest results in the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Enactment of P.L. 94-142 must also be regarded as a significant federal effort in behalf of handicapped children, and the Emergency School Assistance Act greatly helped many communities through the desegregation process. The federal role has also been significant by its funding of the National Defense Education Act at a time of crisis. Many believe our nation faces such a crisis now, but \$50 million for science and mathematics is only a token piece of legislation.

While the Reagan Administration has, in general, been somewhat successful at deregulation, it has failed to reduce funding and eliminate the Department of Education. Focusing heavy political attention on the schools has moved public education to the "front burner," although credit for this must go more to Secretary Bell than to President Reagan. In spite of this attention, there remain major problems and weaknesses in U.S. education that cry out for leadership:

- Urban schools are underfinanced and overloaded with many tough-to-teach students.
- Science and mathematics instruction needs federal leadership on what to teach, how much to teach, and how to pay for the education needed in an area where a teacher shortage exists. While critics of U.S. education tend to exalt Japanese and Western European education in this field, they must be reminded it is the policy of these nations' federal ministries of education that has produced their excellence.
- Legislation such as the Educational Professions Development Act is needed to focus on such problems as helping teachers improve development of intellectual skills and thinking abilities in students.
- Our high schools need as much assistance in instructional improvement as Title I (Chapter 1) has provided for elementary education.
- Funding of educational research and development is grossly inadequate, and the need to learn more about teaching and learning is enormous.
- Vigorous leadership and programs are needed to remove all policies and practices that deny classes of our citizens equal access to success routes.

Such problems can quickly become worse. They need, in the end, to have sharply focused and sustained efforts if the federal government is to provide tangible evidence of improvement.

Thus it is clear that education continues to face difficult years ahead as many persons oversimplify both today's youth and their instructional needs. Schools must teach our youth how to seek truth — and motivate them to want to seek truth. Schools must use ideas, values, and learning processes as the instruments for producing productive and happy citizens. Indeed the greatest tragedy of the last four years is the level of discourse the

Reagan philosophy has produced which overlooks these values. We can only hope that as more and more youth are required to take rigorous academic subjects, someone will discover John Dewey's early 20th century contributions in the areas of student interest and effort, and experiential learning. Perhaps then not all youth will be forced through the same instructional route as they acquire the instruments of a purposeful life.

¹James Fallows, "Immigration: How It's Affecting Us," Atlantic 252 (November 1983):